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Faculty In Print - Beyond the White Negro: Empathy and Anti-Racist Reading

Kimberly Chabot Davis

Bridgewater State University, kimberly.davis@bridgew.edu

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FACULTY IN PRINT

An excerpt from Kimberly Chabot Davis, *Beyond the White Negro: Empathy and Anti-Racist Reading* (University of Illinois Press, 2014).

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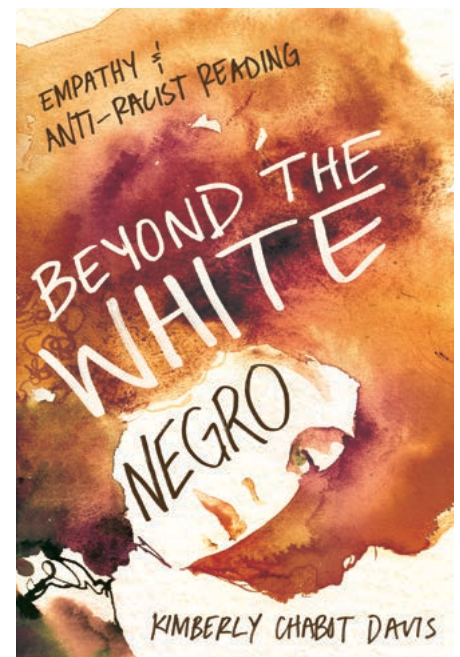
At the start of the twenty-first century, critics concerned about white appropriation of black culture reached back into their cultural lexicons to resurrect a term that Norman Mailer had popularized in 1957: “The White Negro” ... Between 1999 and 2003, nearly every media journalist and scholar writing about the rise to fame of white rapper Eminem felt obliged to use Mailer’s phrase to describe the hip-hop star who claims to be “chocolate on the inside.” Revealing the stereotyping logic often lurking beneath white attraction to African Americans, Mailer’s famous essay “The White Negro” typified the white bohemian fascination with the supposed sexual potency, anarchic wildness, and hip poses of black men. Desiring escape from a 1950s white culture of conformity and anxiety, the hipsters that

Mailer describes sought an antidote in the swagger and “primitive” emotions of “the Negro”: “He lived in the enormous present, he subsisted for his Saturday night kicks, relinquishing the pleasures of the mind for the more obligatory pleasures of the body, and in his music he gave voice to... his rage

and the infinite variations of joy, lust, ... [and the] scream and despair of his orgasm. For jazz is orgasm” (341). The jazz-consuming “White Negro” has now been resurrected as the “wigger,” a term for suburban white kids who dress in ghetto style and consume gangsta rap music to stoke their fantasies of macho

power and violence. Of course, whites’ impersonation and appropriation of blackness has a much longer, multi-media history, encompassing blackface minstrel shows, modernist poetics, and Hollywood film. With good reason and ample evidence, many scholars read this cultural history from blackface to wig-gers as a long and repetitive story of the imperialist and racist nature of whites’ desire to possess the black “Other.”

Beyond the White Negro: Empathy and Anti-Racist Reading complicates this history of white appropriation by analyzing white audiences consuming African-American literature, film, theater, and music in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Extending the cultural sphere of the debate beyond hip-hop music, I argue that the White Negro paradigm is



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inadequate to describe the varied politics of cross-racial identification in the past decade, given the evolution of whiteness in our contemporary moment. To question the often pessimistic and cynical scholarly view of cross-racial empathy and affiliation, I examine encounters with black literature and culture that foster the development of “white allies” who are divesting, rather than investing, in

white power and privilege. I investigate how whites respond to politically progressive forms of African-American culture that aim to expose and undermine white supremacy, and thus are less easily re-purposed for white needs and desires. How might the scholarly narrative of appropriation change if we were to examine white audience responses to a Toni Morrison novel, a Spike Lee film, or politically oriented hip hop? To address that question, chapters of this book are focused on white hip-hop artists, white women discussing black

cultures” (14). In contrast to Tate, *Beyond the White Negro* contends that African-American literature and culture can be productive catalysts for the development of cross-racial empathy and anti-racist identities among white audiences. In response to critics who believe that the forces of commodification render cultural consumption a tainted vehicle for cross-racial understanding, I argue against a too hasty dismissal of white consumption of black cultural texts as a potential conduit for social change. Although “cultural

and interpreting the world, including racist structures of power. While my research confirms that cross-racial sympathy can often resemble a colonizing appropriation of blackness for white needs, the evidence also suggests that cross-cultural encounters can stimulate radical acts of treason against white privilege. In her book *White Women, Race Matters*, Ruth Frankenberg concludes that “whiteness changes over time and space and is in no way a trans-historical essence,” yet critical race scholars such as Noel Ignatiev continue to essentialize whiteness as “nothing but an expression of race privilege” (*Race Traitor* 289). Rather than treating whiteness as a transhistorical essence synonymous with domination, I explore how encounters with African-American literature and popular culture help whites to develop and strengthen anti-racist sensibilities. The nouns “White Negro” and “wigger” are inadequate to describe this reception phenomenon because they imply that blackness is a state of being that can be embodied by white people—a false premise given the tenacity of white privilege in this country. In contrast, *Beyond the White Negro* emphasizes that cross-racial empathy is a state of mind and an aspirational process, a struggle that is ongoing and never complete.

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women’s fiction on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, Boston-area book clubs reading African-American literature, and college student viewers of the racial-conflict films *Do the Right Thing* and *Crash*.

In his book *Everything But the Burden: What White People Are Taking From Black Culture* (2003), editor Greg Tate brings together essays examining white fascination with blackness as a “fetish object” in the realms of music, sports, fashion, comedy, art, cinema, and politics. As his title implies, Tate reductively assumes that white people take everything from black culture except the burden of living in a racist society, and that black culture “remains the most co-optable and erasable of

consumption” is a term commonly used to describe reading, viewing, and listening to texts, the word “consumption” is ill-fitting for my purposes because it signifies purchasing and eating, implying that the culture in question is commodified, easily digested, and disposable. Instead, I highlight experiences of cross-cultural encounter that can profoundly alter the self-conceptions of white readers, viewers, and listeners of black-authored texts. Although white co-optation is an undeniably potent force in the present, the possibility remains for white audiences to do more than simply consume and copy black style, but to experience a perspective shift by being exposed to African-American ways of seeing



Kimberly Chabot Davis is Associate Professor in the Department of English.